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INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 7781
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RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 5465
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA PRIORITY 0691
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 6066
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 4097
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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 007223

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/05/2017
TAGS: KJUS PGOV PINR PREL PTER CO
SUBJECT: CORDOBA PRE-ELECTIONS REPORT: INCREASED
PARTICIPATION DESPITE SECURITY CONCERNS

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer.
Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) New parties and community groups are taking advantage of the greater political space created by the paramilitary demobilization and jailing of elected officials with paramilitary ties to participate actively in the October local elections in Cordoba. Still, candidates fear new criminal groups in the area, and questionable campaign financing remains an issue. Many politicians continue to give hand-outs for votes. The GOC and local authorities are providing protection to candidates, preparing to monitor polling places, and investigating complaints of fraud and corruption. END SUMMARY.

SMALLER PARTIES EXPLOIT NEW OPENINGS

¶2. (U) Alicia Pinzon, the newly appointed Registrar for the city of Monteria, said new left-wing political parties such as the Polo Democratico Alternativo (PDA) are openly campaigning against the traditional parties and local elites that have long held power in the region. Patricia Rodriguez, head of the OAS Special Mission to Support the Peace Process (MAPP/OAS) office in Monteria said they are able to do this, in part, because of the safer climate created by the January 18, 2005 demobilization of the Cordoba block of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC).

¶3. (U) The arrest of several local elected officials with paramilitary ties also created new political openings for the PDA and other smaller parties. In Cordoba, Senators Zulena Jattin (U party), Reginaldo Montez (Cambio Radical), Juan Manuel Lopez Cabrales (Liberal), and Miguel de la Espriella (Colombia Democratica), as well as Congressman Jose de los Santos Negrete (Conservative), have been arrested. Alvaro Emiro Petro, the PDA candidate for governor in Cordoba, said the PDA's strategy is to differentiate themselves from the corruption scandal surrounding traditional party officials.

SECURITY IS STILL A CONCERN

14. (C) New candidates say they are advancing actively campaigning but fear reprisals by armed criminal groups. Petro said he had not received any direct threats, but added that some of his campaign workers and candidates running on the PDA ticket for city council in Monteria had received written threats from new criminal groups, including the Aguilas Negras.

HAND-OUTS REMAIN PART OF THE STRATEGY

15. (C) PDA's candidate for mayor of Monteria, Argemiro Caldron said his wealthy opponents continue to exploit the poor and uneducated, offering them handouts in exchange for votes. He also said the Liberal, Conservative and Colombia Democratica party candidates distribute bags of cement, food and cash at the main marketplaces in Monteria. Campaign workers for Liberal Party candidate for Mayor of Monteria, Juan Carlos Lengua, acknowledged keeping petty cash on hand at their campaign headquarters and distributing small sums of money to about 300 peasants per day. A physician is also on hand to tend to locals' health needs during campaign season, as a "goodwill gesture" to the community. One campaign worker said it was common knowledge that all the parties distribute these benefits. For this reason, few expect newer parties with less resources to capture a large percentage of the vote.

16. (C) Petro claimed the Liberals and Conservatives in Monteria were outspending his campaign by ten to one for publicity, not counting the additional cash payments and other goods they are distributing. Petro and Caldron both claimed the local newspaper, El Meridiano, refused to sell them advertising space or give them any coverage.

JAILED OFFICIALS SUPPORT CANDIDATES

17. (C) Questions also remain about the financing of some local campaigns. A September 9 article in Colombia's leading daily newspaper reported several candidates in Cordoba receive political and financial support from former officials who have been jailed due to allegations of links with former paramilitaries. Petro accused these jailed officials of continuing to control the local governmental machinery and continuing to employ intimidators to ensure their hand-picked successors win. Petro said Liberal party candidate for Cordoba Governor, Marta Saenz, published a full-page ad in the local newspaper stating her alliance with Lopez, Jattin, Montes and Santos. Saenz told us she believes the jailed officials are innocent. She saw no reason to refuse their support. Caldron accused Colombia Democratica's gubernatorial candidate, Margarita Rosa Andrade, of receiving support from jailed ex-Senator Miguel de la Espriella, but Andrade denies such ties.

GOC WORKING TO GUARANTEE FAIR ELECTIONS

18. (C) Petro accused the traditional parties of using government subsidies to obtain votes by linking peoples' continued receipt of unemployment or housing subsidies to votes. Still, Ferlina Salgado at the Inspector General's office (Procuraduria) in Monteria, said she had received no official complaints of such activity. She said the Procuraduria will investigate any official complaints it receives regarding government officials currently in office, while the Prosecutor General's office (Fiscalia) investigates all claims of vote-buying by aspiring candidates.

19. (U) The National Registrar re-assigned Monteria's local registrars to the interior of the country, and brought the

registrar from Meta department to Monteria to ensure unbiased enforcement of voting procedures. Pinzon is training elections workers to be vigilant against voting fraud. These workers will check records to ensure that each person votes only in his or her designated district. To prevent voters from taking photos of ballots to receive payments, elections workers will be requiring all cell phones be turned off before entering the voting booth.

¶10. (U) To respond to concerns about questionable financing for the candidates, the National Elections Commission (CNE) created new investigative units to analyze financial records of all political campaigns. These new three-person investigative units, created on August 28, will investigate charges of illicit funding and over-spending in political campaigns and issue monthly reports of their findings to the CNE. Major Javier Perez Watts, Deputy Commander of the CNP in Cordoba said the police collaborate with local military forces to organize security for political candidates while they are campaigning.

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